DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 301 900 CS 506 486

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TITLE Emancipatory Theatre for Youth.
PUB DATE Aug 88
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Joint Annual Meeting of the American Alliance for Theatre and Education and the Association for Theatre and Disability (Portland, OR, August 2-6, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Awareness; Critical Thinking; Foreign Countries; *Human Relations; Playwriting; Political Socialization; Popular Culture; *Theater Arts; Youth Problems
IDENTIFIERS *Childrens Theater; Controversial Topics; Emancipatory Theater; *Grips Theatre; West Germany; Youth Participation

ABSTRACT

The Grips Theatre, founded in 1969 by Volker Ludwig, performs plays intended to provoke clearheaded imaginative thinking on the part of the children, adolescents, and adults who see their productions. Grips does this by creating and producing original plays that retain the idealistic moment of hope that social relations and people themselves can be qualitatively changed. "Grips" is a German slang term for wit, common sense, and imagination all in one. Its meaning, in the context of the company's title, is to use one's wits and imagination to overcome repression. In the 1980s, after nearly two decades of efforts by Grips to propogate the idea of a realistic, emancipatory theater for children and youth in the Federal Republic of Germany, the company remains very much in the forefront of the theater scene in Europe and the exception to the rule for much of youth theater around the world. The sucess of Grips productions has prompted more playwrights to concentrate on youth theater. Most important for the effectiveness of Grips itself is its accent on continuity. The historical struggle of the Grips ensemble to develop collective theater work is exemplary, and their experiments with emancipatory theater have indeed brought children's theater to a new stage. (MS)

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EMANCIPATORY THEATRE FOR YOUTH

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August, 1988

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INTRODUCTION

The only genuinely exciting development in German-speaking theatre and drama since the demise of the socalled documentary theatre at the turn of the seventies has happened almost unnoticed by mainstreaming critics and scholars in the field.(Claus, p. 88) The Grips Theatre, founded in 1969 by Volker Ludwig (1937), who remains the company's Artistic Director and Principal Author, has established the "one post-war German theatre company which more than any other has focused its repertoire on the burning issues of the seventies and eighties and at the same time, succeeded in breaking down the notion of theatre as a temple for the elevated entertainment of a minority elite." (Claus, p. 88)

Grips has obvious socialist tendencies but it would be misleading to see their work in just political terms, thereby breaking the image created by Jack Zipes' publication POLITICAL PLAYS FOR CHILDREN. The Grips Theatre of West Berlin is a true community theatre that through the years has systematically built up an enthusiastic cross-sectional audience, by presenting stimulating and entertaining plays that contain issues and concerns that affect them directly. (Claus, p. 88) "Furthermore, over the past decade, Grips has been placing more and more emphasis on plays for teenagers and adults," (Claus, p. 89) earning them the reputation of being "the best in Europe." (Claus, letter)

PHILOSOPHY AND GOALS

Grips is a German slang term for wit, common sense and imagination all in one. In the context of the company's title it means use your wits and imagination to overcome regression. The title of the company strongly resembles its overall philosophy and goals.

The purpose of the plays of the Grips Theatre is to provoke clearheaded imaginative thinking on the part of the children, adolescents and adults who see their productions. They do this by creating and producing original plays that retain the idealistic moment of hope that social relations and people themselves can be qualitatively changed. At the same time, they are eminently sober and concrete. They avoid fairy tale endings. As Volker Ludwig explains:

> The purpose of our theatre is emancipatory education. Grips deals with the problems children and young people have with adults or with their environment, instead of the other way round, as has been the case in traditional children's theatre. Instead of leading children up the garden path to an unscathed fairy-tale world, Grips aims at developing their self-confidence, helping them to orient and to assert themselves in their real world. Grips aims at helping children to see our society as one that can be changed, to understand criticism as their undeniable right, to stimulate the enjoyment of creative thinking and of creating alternatives, thus stimulating their social imagination. These aims are to be achieved by treating realistic themes and subject-matter in a language that children accept as their own colloquial language, with easily remembered songs that are fun to re-sing, with a differentiated program of prepatory and follow-up educational assistance, and, finally by pursuing the basic principle of making the audience experience the emancipatory effect generated by the pleasure of rational cognition. (Fischer, 449-450)

Grips opposes the separation of the child's world from that of adults, (Claus, p. 90) and should not be thought solely as a children's theatre. While it is true that the work of Grips has done much to change the children's theatre scene in West Germany, its plays have a broad appeal, and atrract as many adults and teens as they do children. In recent years, Grips has met this challenge by addressing a number of its recent productions solely to the problems of adolescents in West Germany who have suffered enormous oppression during the recent economic recession. Several programs set up by the West German government have led to greater political and sexual repression at the schools, poor teaching and learning conditions, and a future of unemployment or undesirable labor for those who do graduate from high school. (Zipes, PPC, p. 14) The result is that adolescents are becoming more and more frustrated by school and work, and increasingly find themselves at the mercy of a socio-economic system which is geared to encourage them not to think and use their talents. Recent Grips productions are battling and challenging this prospectus.

In addition to its philosophy and goals, two of the most impressive facts about Grips are its continued success and productivity. Since its foundation in 1969, Grips has created over 30 original plays, all of which have been written and produced by the company itself. Grips' forty full-time and free-lance members have toured extensively in Europe and Canada, and made its U.S. premeire July 20, 1988 at the Pepsico Sumerfare in Purchase, NY. The organization is founded on the principle of democratic co-determination of all the members of the ensemble. Because of this philosophy, the amount of work and involvement for every individual is much greater and more demanding than it

would be in a "normal" theatre run along traditional lines of management and organization. (Fischer, YPG, 448)

STYLE

The programmatic statement of goals of the Grips Theatre leaves no doubt about "the indebtedness of Grips to Brecht: realistic theatre that teaches recognition of the world as one which can and must be changed." (Fischer, 450) Like the plays of Brecht, those of Grips are not duly didactic, but aim to produce fun and enjoyment, particularly with regard to the pleasure involved in the experience of productivity and creativity. The concept of "social imagination" is central to both of these aims. "The plays of Grips are designed to stimulate creative thinking in a social context: to rouse imagination untapped by fairy tales and fantasy plays; to engage children in their own environment; to help them establish themselves in their relationships with freinds, parents, teachers, etc.; and to make them experience the pleasure of developing alternatives, as well as express their own interests and opinions, as well as acting in solidarity with their peers." (Fischer, 450)

Almost all of their plays are Brechtian Lehrstücke (learning plays), which are performed in a cabaret style that enhances the estrangment effects and allows for pleasure in learning. This means that the actors do <u>not</u> try to mimic children or act naturalistically. On the contrary. Social conditions and events are explained and demonstrated from a children's point of view based on socialist principles which the actors themselves have been trying to elaborate. The plays do not present final solutions to

problems but show possible alternatives to conditions which are oppressive of self-defeating. The plays are not ends in themselves, but means to stimulate audiences how to develop dialectical thinking. In other words, the plays do not preach answers, nor should they be performed that way. They want to teach how enjoyable it can be to master critical thinking which will allow each individual in concrete social situations to pose questions whose solutions bring about greater class solidarity and freedom.

Each scene of a Grips play tends to be a social experiment, a testing of the social conditions to see if perhaps some other form of organization might make more sense and allow for more freedom of movement and development. Characters represent antagonistic principles, and as the characters are unmasked, the processes underlying the principles become more visible. The actors step out of their roles to show what the conditions are and how they act upon people in given circumstances. The songs of the plays further illustrate the importance of developing a critical method, an approach to a problem, rather than easy solutions. The music allows audiences to retain catch-phrases and it also lends to emphasizing the politics of the lyrics by its unusual beat and juxtapositions. Its rich melodic intonations and abrupt breaks suggest the variations possible for the characters seeking new ways to make their lives more joyful. It is this joy in change that the music conveys through its energetic elements.

Plays of the Grips repertoire share a number of specific stylistic qualities which are typical only to the youth plays of

Grips. The plays of Grips are planted firmly in the here and now. Their most important structural feature is a story-line that depicts as realistically as possible life experiences of young people in today's world. (Fischer, 465) Mostly set in an everyday working-class environment, the plays present their subject matter through the eyes of their child protagonists. "'Normal' events are seen in a new light, and thus called into question." (Claus, p. 89)

Rehearsals for Grips productions begin before the script is finished. Playwrights know the ensemble and write for different actors. The actors add ideas during the writing and rehearsal. (Claus, 95) Often the Grips ensemble has discussions with young people while developing the script, using the language of the young people in the actual writing. (Claus, 98) Grips' plays generally contain numerous scenes which are structured in a cabaret like style. The plays focus more heavily on depicting social relations than on giving a psychological interpretation of a character. Each scene uncovers a problem and moves against the audience's expectations toward a revelation of underlying social forces. Often this is done with sight gags, irony, or outright exposure of the hypocrisy. Songs and music when included are used to stress political points. (Zipes, p. 9)

Grips staging is never spectacular. The sets tend to be sparse and provide only the most necessary elements to suggest time and place of action. The stage is not used to create an illusion of real life, rather it is used to display a process that has alternatives which can be "played out" in new forms of social relations.

None of the plays reach a traditional "happy ending," though solutions to particular problems are suggested through collective actiom. "The Grips plays are didactic provocations rather than didactic solutions." (Zipes, p. 9)
Volker Ludwig explains there is a realistic style of production in a cabaret tradition that isn't really a style. "It is a principle, an approach, a method...I think of the audience; I try to put myself in their place; I look to understand their interests, their preoccupations, their tastes. The realistic form is not essential. It is necessary to place the audience itself, to best encircle the subject of their preoccupations and, only at the end, to find the form which convinces the best." (Fournier, 79-87)

REPERTORY

Plays of the Grips repertoire share a number of specific stylistic qualities which are typical only to the youth plays of Grips. These production qualities are representative of the company's development and its aesthetic and political orientation as well.

The Grips repertoire can be divided into two phases. The first phase, 1969-1972 is the anti-authoritarian phase, and is composed of six plays. The basic theme of all these plays is "'children's power;' children versus adults who are portrayed as personifications of the enemy without clarifying the social conditions and processes that bring such antagonisms." (Zipes, ETYC, 85) MAN OH MAN (1972), a dramatic piece that looks at children's women's and workers' oppression is probably the best production from this phase.

Phase II, 1973 to present,consists of plays that address itself to actual social problems and to present possible solutions to problems which Grips considers to be of a pressing nature. (Zipes, FPC, p.9) The characters found in the plays of Phase Two exhibit much greater depth than those of Phast I. They are all multifaceted, individualistic, and display unmistakable identities--they are more realistic. This applies to both child and adult characters. Also, the action has become more complex, including many different areas of thematic importance and levels of plot. In addition, the issues raised in these later works are shown to be interconnecting. They affect the whole range of a person's life experience and they appear as problems that can only be solved within the context of total situations.

It is also during this phase of production that the company realized that the 13 to 18 year olds represented an audience totally neglected by established theatres, and so a new genre, Jugenstück was developed. Even more than the children's plays, these productions for teen-agers concentrate on topics of the day.

YOU CAN'T POSSIBLY STAND THIS (1975) addresses the problems of teen unemployment, the role of teens in society, school authoritarianism, and the political firing of teachers. Three years later, THE MOST BEAUTIFUL TIME OF LIFE (1978), a rock political play, was presented for audiences age 13 and up. It shares many of the same features as YOU CAN'T: loosely connected scenes, multifaceted plot with central focus on a group of adolescents, several levels of action with corresponding

scenic locations, and a rock band providing an introductory overture, transitional music and six songs. The Best Years of Your Life, however, does not deal with school related problems. Rather, it focuses on the problems older teens face: unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse, juvenile delinquincy, sex and marriage, the planning of one'd daily life and future, and the politics of the youth welfare administration. At the core of the play is the description of the learning process which shows the group growing closer together, every member coming to understand his or her own individual needs as well as recognition of mutual interests and feelings towards each other

An early eighties production, A Leftist Story (1980) is an ambitious piece of theatre that runs well over four hours. It was premiered in 1980 at the annual International Children's Youth Festival. The central topic is a contemporary conflict in German society today: the growing rejection of today's teenagers with the nostalgia of ex-revolutionaries who have meanwhile become members of the establishment, fully integrated into the system they once had set out to destroy. The plot focuses on an ironic look back at the life of the generation of 1968 by tracing the development of a girl from West Germany and her two boy friends from the time of her innocent arrival at West Berlin's Free University in 1966, via her involvement with radical student politics, to her present-day situation as divorcee in a trendy leftist, bourgeois environment in a state of flux. The play is interspersed with songs and sketches of earlier Grips' works (1967-70) which map out the political background and thus form an integral part of the plot.(Claus, 91)

In 1981, the central themes of squatting and the general 'no future' malais were presented in yet a fourth rock musical All Plastic. In this production especially, musical numbers form an an integral part of the action. (Claus p. 90) Completely Out of Character (1984) explores neo-fascist attitudes toward foreigners. All of these works for teens, written between 1975 and 1984 were instant hits and were still playing to packed houses when Grips removed them from the repetoire because it felt they were outdated. (Claus, 90)

In April, 1986, Grips' drive to make popular theatre on topical issues for its very own clientile resulted in the production of what is regarded by many to be the first indigenous German musical. Line One is a logical development of the company's previous work. It is a careful blending of the company's early 'play with political Cabaret' of Phase I, with the adolescent play with rock music of much of Phase II productions, merged into the 'Musikalische Revue' genre, that just might be heralding a new Phase III of Grips' productions. "The term 'musical revue' was chosen in order to emphasize the graditions on which authors Ludwig and Heymann had built their show, those of political cabaret and the political revue." The title of the piece refers to the underground Line Number 1 which passes through West Berlin in an east-west direction. (Claus, 91)

The plot relates the experiences of a girl from a West German Backwater who has run away from home in order to look for her boyfriend, a rock star, by whom she is expecting a baby. The transient nature of the train journeys, which, as in real life, take the spectator above and below ground, allow the authors to confront his heroine in a sequence of loosely linked scenes with

people from all walks of life. Through their positions and attitudes, prejudices and sympathies, the playwrights weave a web of inter-relationships between young and old, affluent and destitute, Germans and non-Germans, left and right, present and past, which develops into a tapestry of present day society. (Claus, 91)

Pepsico Sumerfare, which is responsible for bringing the Grips Theatre to the U.S. for its long awaited premiere, describes Line One in its season brochure as a "blending of humor and entertainment with biting comment on some of today's most problematic social issues." (Pepsico brochure) In addition to the two-week run of Line One, Pepsico teamed up with members of the NYU faculty and the Creative Arts Team to present on July 22 a symposium entitled: International Perspectives in Theatre-in-Education Today. Featuring Grips' founder and artistic director Volker Ludwig, the panel also included Lowell Swortzell, Achim Nowak, artistic director of the Creative Arts Team; Jim Mirrione, CAT's resident playwright, and Dr. Robert Landy, director of NYU's Drama Therapy Program. Cross-cultural differences, similarities and problems that exist in creating theatre for young people living in today's complex world was the primary focus of discussion.

CONCLUSION

In the 1980's, after nearly two decades of efforts by Grips to propogate the idea of a realistic, emancipatory theatre for children and youth in the Federal Republic of Germany, the company remains very much on the forefront of the theatre scene in Europe and the exception to the rule for much of youth theatre around the world. The success of Grips productions has prompted more playwrights to concentrate on youth theatre. Most important for the effectiveness of Grips itself is its accent on continuity.

The historical struggle of the Grips ensemble to develop collective theate work is exemplary, and their experiments with emancipatory theatre have brought children's theatre to a new stage, which may mark the end of that art form as we have come to know it.

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